

To: Mazon team members and Board of Directors

From: Leonard Fein

Re: Obesity and Mazon

I very much appreciate Robin's thoughtful comments, with which, with respect, I disagree.

Robin asserts that "obesity as a subset of poor nutrition." Yet if that is the case – as I believe it is (genetic causes aside), then obviously, poor nutrition is *not* a subset of poverty. Most obese people in the United States are *not* poor. It is true that a higher percentage of poor African-American women are obese than any other demographic group, but the association between childhood obesity and obesity among males (of any racial./ethnic group) and food insecurity has not been established.

I've not read – read, but not studied carefully – an array of documents on these matters, including in particular a FRAC paper entitled *Obesity, Food Insecurity and the Federal Nutrition Programs: Understanding the Linkages*. I urge you to read it (http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger&obesity.htm), as also other documents listed on the FRAC web site. What I learn is that the issue is considerably more complex and the research so far inadequate to establish the intricate linkages we may have assumed. Current data, for example, indicated that roughly one-third of Americans are obese. (And another one-third are overweight.) But only half that number are poor, and among the poor, a minority are obese.

So while we are talking about a public health problem, we need to tread quite carefully.

As you may know, Mazon has been pressed, from time to time, to deal directly with the problem of homelessness. We have resisted, the ground that our expertise is in hunger. That doesn't mean we don't think homelessness is a very serious problem, deserving of attention. It means only that we know what we know, and we keep our focus on that and that alone.

Now comes the issue of healthy nutrition, an issue that cuts across income levels, an issue that has some relationship to the populations of greatest concern to us and warrants this conversation – but an issue, at the same time, that creates problems for us. How can we, appropriately known and respected for our work on hunger, deal with the problem of obesity at the same time? They are *not* the same problem, and it is simply a mistake to conflate them. I believe that if and as we do, we will vitiate our core message.

That does not, however, mean that we should be indifferent to issues of healthy nutrition. I would think it entirely appropriate, and completely within our mandate, to encourage our grantees to pay substantial attention to the kind of foodstuffs they distribute. I would not support, but would fully understand, a proposal that henceforward, all our food related dollars be spent exclusively on milk, fruits and vegetables. I would be

comfortable with our calling attention to the relationship between poor nutrition and obesity.

If that is all we mean now to do, let's do it. But that is different from characterizing ourselves as an "anti-hunger and anti-obesity" organization. Obesity is a subset of a subset, a problem of *some* people who suffer from food insecurity (and of very many who do not).

Ergo: Nutrition, yes; obesity per se, no.